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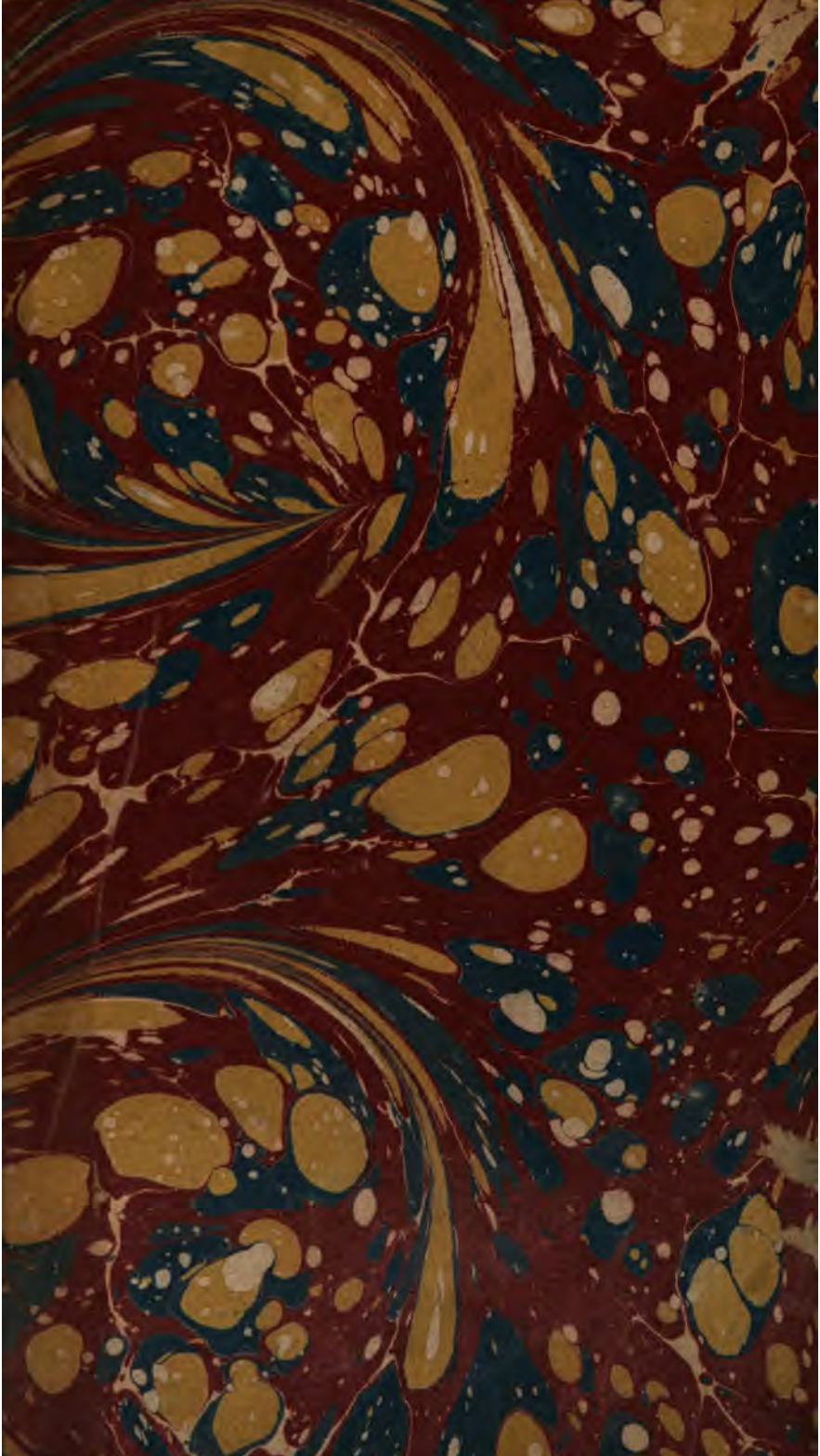

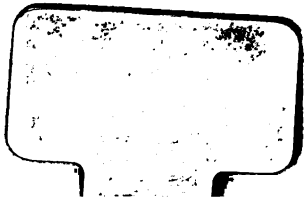

THE MEANING OF THIS SERVICE.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN

THE PARISH CHURCH

OF

WIMBLEDON, SURREY,

TO

THE CANDIDATES FOR CONFIRMATION,

SEPTEMBER 21, 1845.

BY THE

REV. RICHARD LEONARD ADAMS, M.A.,

LATE STUDENT OF CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD, AND
PERPETUAL CURATE OF WIMBLEDON.

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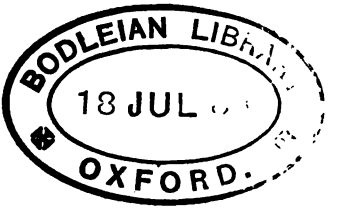

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SERMON.

Exodus xii. 26.

"What mean ye by this service?"

It was just previous to the departure of Israel out of the land of Egypt, that the inquiry contained in these words was by anticipation proposed and answered. The last of those awful visitations, by which Egypt was desolated, was now about to fall upon Pharaoh, and upon his subjects, in the destruction of the first-born in every house. That coming night was indeed a night "to be much observed," not alone by the enemies but by the friends of the Lord; for while to the former it was a night of terror and amazement, and bitter repentance for past obstinacy, to the latter it was an earnest and a pledge of that perfect "deliverance out of the hand of their enemies," which would enable them "to serve the Lord without fear, walking in holiness and righ-

teousness before Him all the days of their life!" It was in fact the precise moment, when Moses at the command of God had instituted and ordained that Paschal sacrifice, which was henceforth to be observed as a type and shadow of better things to come,—that is, till the type should be lost in the antitype, the shadow in the substance, and the Lamb of the Law should be superseded by the Lamb of the Gospel, even by that real "Lamb of God which," (and which alone) "taketh away the sins of the world." Looking onwards then to times when the existing generation of Israelites should have passed away, it is as a question proposed by their descendants that the text comes before us. "It shall come to pass," said Moses, "when ye be come to the land which the Lord will give you according as He hath promised, that ye shall keep this service. And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? that ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when He smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses. And the people bowed the head and worshipped."

But, brethren, whilst such was the connexion, and such the immediate bearing, of the passage before us, it admits of, nay, it demands a much wider application. It is suited, it is intended

for our admonition also; it stands forth like many another startling interrogation of Scripture, as addressed personally to ourselves, if only grace be given us to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it. Let us then endeavour by God's aid, first, to notice some general circumstances in which this question may be profitably asked, and profitably answered; and having so done, let us apply it to those special and peculiar circumstances under which many of our younger members are at this season placed.

First, then, we may observe, that the question of our text is in the strictest meaning of the word a *catholic* question. It is not a question which answered once need not be answered again, which put to-day need not be put again to-morrow; neither yet is it a question which, suitable to some persons, is unsuitable to others; but it is a question addressed to all persons, everywhere, and always. It stands out as a word of warning alike to the reckless sinner, and to the decent professor; and inasmuch as in some service, be it on the Lord's side, or be it on the world's, we are all of us engaged, therefore of us all generally and of each of us in particular is this question asked, and a reply demanded, "What mean ye by this service?" Putting then the question first to those amongst us, be they more or be they fewer in number, who are living absolutely

without God in the world, I would ask what answer would you or could you give to the inquiry of our text? For remember, I beseech you, that whilst you may not choose to answer in plain words, "we will not have this man to reign over us," you are answering just as plainly, just as intelligibly, by your actions, whose you are and whom you serve. Now if by your life, by your conversation, by your habits, and by your company, you proclaim that you and the Saviour are utter strangers; if you love neither His presence, nor His house, nor His word, nor His people, then at once we may cry, "What need we any further witness?" for the question is already answered. Your master is the god of this world, your service is the service of sin, your walk is in the broad way which leadeth unto death, and your "latter end must be that you perish everlastingly." What *you* therefore mean by this service of sin is evidently this—that you are determined to run all hazards, that you "desire not the knowledge of God's ways," that setting consequences at defiance you are resolved to go on still in worldliness, and "to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season." In a word, life and death being set before you, you have chosen death; a blessing and a curse being proposed, you have deliberately refused the blessing and preferred the curse; and though "the wages of sin

is death," and though "the gift of God is eternal life," yet have you resolved to despise that gift and to accept of those wages, to put from you the day of grace, and to forget if you can the day of judgment! But, brethren, if some such hardened sinners as these are even now present amongst us, there are probably many others of a more decent, and at first sight, a more hopeful description, to whom I would apply the inquiry of the text. I refer then to those of us who with much of seriousness in their views, and with much of sobriety in their conduct, cannot be taxed with any open and palpable breach of the ordinances of God. Observant of domestic and of public prayer, regular in their attendance both in the house and at the table of the Lord, there is yet room, aye and need, for the inquiry, "What mean ye by this service?" For strange as it may sound, the very fact of all this regularity in externals involves the danger of internal deadness, and the consciousness that all is right as to the form, may hinder us from discovering that all is wrong as to the spirit, of prayer. Look then, I pray you, brethren, whether there be vitality as well as visibility in your services. Look to see not alone that the outward and visible machinery be there, but that the inward and spiritual principle be there also; for it is a sad but most common case to find the wheels and the

hands of devotion, moving still in seeming order from the mere impulse of long-continued habit, when the mainspring—love to God and zeal for His service—has long since ceased to move. Put it therefore, brethren, as a question the most serious imaginable to your own hearts, "What *mean* ye by" this service or by that? Whom seek ye in drawing nigh to God in His house, or in your own? and for what specific purpose do you come? Surely it would solemnize our spirits in approaching the throne of grace, if we would previously ask ourselves the meaning, the purpose, the object for which we come. If, considering that "God is a Spirit, and must be worshipped in spirit and in truth," if recollecting His majesty and our meanness, His knowledge and our ignorance, His holiness and our vileness, we did but ask ourselves "What mean we by this service?" surely much of mockery in prayer we should escape; and if our words were fewer as to their number, they would be far weightier as to their spirit. For has not this house, dear brethren, nay, has not your own also, witnessed often the form without the reality of devotion? Have you not times out of mind made confession of sins for which you have not mourned, and promises of amendment which you have not kept? Have not your lips uttered what your heart did not feel, and has not a form of sound words

covered but too often the formality of an unsound heart? Oh! if so, remember that then and there your service was a mockery, and your prayer was sin. "The Lord surely saw it and it displeased Him," and whilst man might deem of your devotion that it was fervent, and of your prayers that they were effectual, yet they were to the ear of God but as words without meaning, the offering of a sacrifice which He abhorred.

But, brethren, whilst thus briefly and generally I have touched upon some of the purposes, to which our text should be applied, there is yet another to which I would now call the serious and earnest attention of all those amongst us, who in the coming opportunity of Confirmation are about to offer themselves anew as "soldiers and servants" of Jesus Christ. And addressing myself now especially though not exclusively to such as these, I would ask of you, dear brethren, or rather I would beseech you to ask of yourselves, "What mean you by this service?" and oh! mark me when I say that it is a question very much sooner asked than answered; for whilst very simple as to its terms, it is all important as to its results. Now, as far as mere head knowledge goes, I believe you to be all informed as to the nature and intent of the rite of Confirmation. You are aware that it is the recapitulation of an engagement, the republi-

cation as it were of a vow, made for you at a time "when by reason of tender age" it could not be made by you. You are aware that, whilst in itself but an ordinance of man, yet that its tendency is to edification, and its consequence a blessing, if it be entered upon and undertaken in the spirit of prayer.

But, brethren, I am not, I may not be satisfied with knowledge of the head unless also I have a good hope that through grace knowledge in the heart—even that knowledge which maketh wise unto salvation—has been vouchsafed to you also. Therefore bear with me whilst briefly but earnestly, very simply but very seriously, I point out to you the bearing and importance of this rite upon your present and your future welfare. Now the single inquiry, the solitary question, which in this ordinance will be proposed to you is this, "Do ye renew the solemn promise and vow that was made in your name at your Baptism; ratifying and confirming the same in your own persons, and acknowledging yourselves bound to believe, and to do all the things then undertaken for you?" And the answer which by your very presence you will be giving, and which with your mouths you are expected to give, is comprised in that little word, "I do." So that it is upon this one response of yours that the whole service hinges. A blessing from

above is then craved for you, and the outward and visible purpose of your coming is completed. Oh! but mark me when I tell you, brethren, of yet another question, which not in the letter but in the spirit, not in form but in fact, will then and there be asked of each of you—and asked not by man but by the living God. And that question is, "What mean ye by this service?" Anything? or nothing? much? or little? do you really say what you mean, and mean what you say?

To enable you, therefore, to meet this inquiry in a fitting spirit, let us consider for a moment what answer you can return to Him who makes it. Now I need hardly remind you that the whole rite of confirmation goes upon the assumption that something was done and promised for you, at a time when you could neither do nor promise anything for yourself; for you must ever bear in mind that it is no *new* covenant which is proposed to you, but merely the ratification of an old one. You are not called upon to contract any new engagement, but simply to declare whether by the terms of that *already* contracted for you, you are willing to abide. And what that covenant and that engagement were, we perceive at once by referring to the record of the transaction embodied in the catechism; where we read that three things were then promised and vowed in your behalf, viz.:—

First. That you should renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanity of this wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh.

Secondly. That you should believe all the articles of the Christian faith.

Thirdly. That you should keep God's holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of your life.

So that the pledge here given involves nothing less than a renunciation of all sin, belief in all God's word, and obedience to all God's commandments. The meaning, therefore, of the Lord in requiring all this, is perfectly clear, for "this is the will of God, even your sanctification." The meaning also of our own church in this service is equally clear, for it evidently is, that we should "renounce the hidden works of darkness, and live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world;" whilst as to the meaning of the actual service itself, there can be no mistake, since it simply points us to an existing promise made for us, and invites us now to renew and ratify it personally for ourselves. But, dear brethren, whilst the meaning of the Lord, and of the church, and of the formulary itself, are all too plain to be misunderstood, there remains another and most momentous question still unanswered—"What mean *you* by this service?" have you thought over the meaning? have you

comprehended its meaning? have you subscribed to its meaning? for, if not, be very sure that in assenting to its meaning, you are deliberately mocking God with your lips, professing much love, whilst your heart is far from him.

I tell you, therefore, brethren, with all the seriousness I can use, that it is no light matter in which you are about to engage. If you come, as many do come, carelessly, thoughtlessly, professing what you do not feel, and promising what you neither intend nor wish to perform; if in words you renounce the pomps and vanity of the world, and the sinful lusts of the flesh, and forthwith rush eagerly into the world to partake of the one and fall into the other; if all the articles of a Christian's faith you solemnly promise to believe, and anon are found acting as though faith and works, belief and practice, had no possible connexion; or lastly, if, after solemnly engaging to keep the holy will of God, and by His help to walk with Him all the days of your life, you are nevertheless presently found even as others walking after the course of this present evil world—then I tell you of a truth that a confirmation such as this is a confirmation in sin and not in holiness, it involves a curse and not a blessing, it is an added item in your future reckoning, for it is an added insult to the Majesty of Heaven. But I would hope, and I would

pray, that as to many of you it is in another spirit and with other feelings that you are about to "go yonder to worship." I would hope and believe, as to many of you, that you have thought of these things, and that now, not lightly but seriously, not unadvisedly but prayerfully, you are about anew to offer yourselves as the soldiers and servants of Jesus Christ. To such as you, then, dear brethren, I would say, go on and prosper; expect a blessing, and a blessing you shall receive, ask for grace, and grace shall assuredly be given you. And in truth, brethren, if I were to point out any particular time of life, at which in a more peculiar measure help from above is *needed*, it would be that at which young persons are usually presented for confirmation. They are just stepping forth, as it were, upon the threshold of a world, pleasant to the eye, but too often fatal to the traveller. Theoretically they have heard of its cares and its dangers, but as yet practically they know nothing of them. The surface of things around is fair, and beyond it they do not see; their sun seems just risen cheerily upon the earth, and they dream not of the storms and tempests which must precede its setting. The dewdrops of pleasure are sparkling in its beams, and they know not that these will quickly disappear, and leave them to "the burden and heat of the day," with nothing around them but the

withered forms of exhausted gratifications. It is, then, at such a season as this, when hope is vigorous but experience unknown, that our scriptural church has wisely stepped in to furnish the youthful traveller with provision for the way. She warns him of dangers which, though unsuspected, lurk in the flowery meads around him; she tells him of enemies that lie in wait for his soul; she offers him the "shield of faith," and "the helmet of salvation," and "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." And opening to him, as now she does, that heavenly feast which is intended for "the strengthening and refreshing of our souls," she bids him go forth "in the strength of that meat," cautiously yet confidently, prayerfully yet rejoicingly, assured that he shall be "more than conqueror through Him that loved" him.

I add then to each of you, brethren, but this word of admonition. Be quite sure that you have *a meaning* in coming to this rite; and further be quite sure that your meaning and the Lord's meaning do not disagree. If your meaning be an earnest desire to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ;" if, feeling yourself a sinner, you come for pardon, and feeling yourself weak, you come for "grace to help in every time of need,"—"oh, well is thee, and happy shalt thou be." The morning of your life shall be

lighted up with a brighter beam than the sun of nature can dispense, and at your "evening time it shall be light." Cheered by God's promises, guided by God's Spirit, guarded by God's providence, and gladdened by God's presence, you shall go on your way rejoicing. And whether that way be a little longer or a little shorter, a little smoother or a little rougher as to outward circumstances, yet shall the "peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your heart and mind through Christ Jesus:" till at length the warfare accomplished, the battle fought, and the crown obtained, yours shall be that cry of triumph as you enter into the joy of your Lord, "Thanks be to God, who hath given me also the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

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